

**Why did the perpetrators involved in the Nazi-led genocide of European Jewries do what they did? What forms did “perpetration” take? In your answer, draw on and analyze two of the following assigned sources: any of the primary sources from ““The Adult ‘Euthanasia’ Program, Selected Documents,” Browning, Ordinary Men, Primo Levi, “The Gray Zone,” or the testimony of Franz Suchomel.**

The Holocaust was a multifaceted phenomenon, influenced by a spectrum of complex motives. The perpetrators encompassed different groups with varied reasons, ranging from the state’s agenda to further an "Aryan" race, the frontline soldiers influenced by intense peer pressure, the German populace enticed by economic windfalls, to the coerced victims threatened with their own demise within death camps. Some forms that this perpetration took were the state's orchestrated compartmentalization of mass murder, the large-scale executions by soldiers, the exploitation of slave labor by German corporations, and the forced brutalization of victims at the hands of their fellow sufferers.

The Nazi state meticulously orchestrated the Holocaust with to advance its vision of an "Aryan race." One method the state employed to effectuate this genocide was the adoption of an industrial, assembly-line approach to mass murder to make the process more efficient and less psychologically burdensome. Initially, the regime tasked each soldier with the entire execution process of a Jewish victim, a procedure that was not only emotionally taxing but also too slow to accomplish the state’s goals. To speed up the process and reduce individual guilt, the regime divided the execution tasks. Soldiers would transport Jews from collection points to execution sites, allowing other shooters to move onto subsequent locations (Browning 67). Later, the regime refined its process further, further splitting tasks among soldiers and assigning the act of killing to “specialists” (Browning 166). This segregation of duties distanced soldiers from the

overall atrocity, providing psychological relief and enabling them to contribute to the genocide more readily. This strategic compartmentalization ensured the smooth operation of the state's genocidal machinery.

Germans on the frontlines perpetrated the genocide by fighting the war, rounding up Jews into ghettos, and slaughtering them. Their reasons for participating are multifaceted, but one significant factor was a fear of ostracization from their peers. A telling example comes from a Police Battalion 101 member, who, while evading the act of killing Jews, faced no official repercussions but was subject to derogatory remarks like “shithead” and “weakling” from his peers (Browning 65). Those who refrained from participating risked being seen as moralistic and as leaving the “dirty work” to their comrades, and thus faced potential isolation. This self-inflicted pressure by the soldiers was one reason they were pushed to genocide.

Moving from the battlefield to the home front, the Holocaust also brought about significant economic advantages for many “Aryan” Germans. Corporations like IG Farben, Volkswagen, and BMW prospered by utilizing the abundant slave labor from concentration camps (Sarah Stein, “The Nazi Extermination Camps,” 2023). This usage of forced labor also served as a self-preservation strategy; those who engaged in these practices could avoid being drafted to the front lines. Other individuals saw a huge increase in their quality of life as a result of the Holocaust. One example is the wife of an Auschwitz Commandant living in Auschwitz I, who commented “here I want to live until the end of my life” (Sarah Stein, “The Nazi Extermination Camps,” 2023). Thus, the allure of unexpected comforts and significant economic gains became potent motivators for many Germans, inciting them to engage in and benefit from the genocide of European Jewry.

Lastly, a complex aspect of the Holocaust's perpetration was the coerced involvement of victims themselves. Ensnared within the survival struggle, certain victims became part of the genocidal machinery. Primo Levi's "The Gray Zone" posits the concept of a moral "gray zone", where victim and perpetrator identities are blurred amidst the camp's horrific conditions. This notion is best exemplified by the Sonderkommando units—Jewish prisoners who, under duress and in exchange for temporary survival benefits, would complete tasks ranging from herding new arrivals into gas chambers to disposing of bodies afterward (Levi 2449). Similarly, the Kapos—prisoners who were assigned to supervise their fellow inmates—became an extension of the oppressive regime, often employing brutal methods to maintain order (Levi 2438). However, their compliance was driven by a desperate bid for survival, marked by improved living conditions and additional food rations.

Thus, the Holocaust was facilitated by the Nazi's strategic division of duties, soldiers' peer pressure, economic gains from Jewish slave labor, and the coerced involvement of the victims themselves. This complex web of factors highlights the depths to which human behavior can plunge under extreme circumstances, underscoring the importance of vigilance to prevent such atrocities in the future.

## References

- Primo Levi, "The Gray Zone," from "The Drowned and the Saved," The Complete Works of Primo Levi, edited by Ann Goldstein, pp. 2430-2456.
- Sarah Stein, "The Nazi Extermination Camps," HIST 5 (lecture, UCLA, 2023)
- Christopher Browning, Ordinary Men, pages 1-78, 133-191.